

# Evaluating Idiosyncratic Programs of Education for the Gifted

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Programs of education for gifted children may be contrasted with enrichment programs. They are distinct in their implementation, in the characteristics of their teachers and students, and in their underlying conceptualization. This article describes a program evaluation based on open-ended interviews, presents interview schedules, and outlines methods of analysis and interpretation.

Il y a lieu de distinguer les programmes s'adressant aux enfants doués des programmes enrichis. Leur mode d'implantation, les concepts théoriques sous-jacents et les caractéristiques des enseignants et des élèves ne sont pas les mêmes. Dans cet article, l'auteur décrit une évaluation des programmes à l'aide d'entrevues fondées sur des questions ouvertes; il y présente en outre des séries d'entrevues et donne un aperçu général des méthodes d'analyse et d'interprétation utilisées.

"Who are gifted children?" and "What do they need?" This paper examines the unique constraints placed on the evaluation of programs for the gifted and talented, and identifies the implications of these constraints for evaluation methods and criteria.

Programs of education for gifted learners, in contrast to enrichment programs, are idiosyncratic and require naturalistic evaluation methods. In light of the nature and purpose of programs of education for gifted learners, evaluation should emphasize broad program goals rather than specific program objectives.

## THE PURPOSE OF PROGRAMS OF EDUCATION FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

Programs of education challenge gifted learners, stimulating the realization of latent capabilities and processes (Clark, 1983, p. 132). This entails:

1. Nurturing any interests and talents of gifted learners (Maker, 1982, p. 224);
2. Enhancing autonomous skills and attitudes that increase student capability and predisposition independently to identify and to undertake challenges. Enhancement activities might include teaching research skills,

report writing, project management, creative problem solving, audio visual media use, all the while encouraging self-directedness, tolerance for ambiguity, and intellectual risk-taking;

3. Facilitating concurrent growth and development in intellectual ability, creativity, communication ability, leadership, group skills, social/emotional development, moral reasoning, and fine and gross motor ability.

#### THE IDIOSYNCRATIC NATURE OF PROGRAMS OF EDUCATION FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

The following sequence of events is typical of school(s) beginning a program for gifted and talented learners. A teacher learns in the spring, or perhaps even later, that she/he will be assigned to working with one or more groups of gifted/talented students for 90 minutes, or 140 minutes, or even 6 hours per week. The students have not yet been identified and this is the program teacher's task in the first part of the school year. The school jurisdiction may or may not provide professional development activities and materials to support the teacher in developing suitable activities for the program. At Christmas, administrators ask program teachers to write a document outlining the philosophy and operational model for the school's program of education for gifted and talented learners. At the end of the school year, the program teacher is asked to write something that can serve as a form of evaluation report for the program for that year.

A scenario such as this can also continue from one year to the next, given that changes in staff, students, and program scheduling are more frequent than not. Thus the practical realities of program implementation make gifted and talented programs idiosyncratic.

Even where a school or school jurisdiction has a long-established program, each year's offering will be unique. Teachers change, whether through professional development, experiences with their program, reflection, or life in the dynamic school and community context.

The needs of each year's gifted and talented students are different. One year a majority of students may have strong math/science interest, and the next an aptitude for and interest in the language arts. One group may have a preponderance of spontaneously creative students who enjoy doing group projects. Another may consist mainly of students who prefer independent work and have difficulty working with others or even communicating well in a group. There is no prescription or formula that can be rigidly followed to ensure a "goodness-of-fit" among students, teachers, and program activities.

Although a teacher in a program of education for gifted and talented learners may not set out to develop individualized plans for each student in a pull-out group, he/she will be alert to manageable opportunities to incorporate students' interests and talents. A teacher might, for instance,

present units with general themes or central concepts (for example, change, animals, future) and have students select or devise thematic projects requiring novel or extended use of their talents or interests.

Overall, attention to interests and talent areas of students, responsiveness to students' growth, and development of autonomous learner skills and attitudes result in programs of education for gifted and talented learners that are unique or idiosyncratic rather than predictable or replicable. This is not to say that resource teachers for gifted learners work in the absence of a conceptual framework. Rather, the point is that the conceptual framework will be operationalized differently with each pull-out program or special class.

#### GIFTED PROGRAMMING VERSUS ENRICHMENT PROGRAMMING

Enrichment programming, in contrast to programs of education for gifted and talented learners, follows a common set of objectives and outcomes. It makes advance decisions about educational experiences thought beneficial for incoming program students. Thinking skills booklets may be purchased and plans made to use them during set blocks of time. Field trips and cultural activities may be scheduled. Mini-courses on specialized topics (for example, semantics) may be arranged to extend, broaden, and deepen students' educational achievement. Tannenbaum (1983) and Davis and Rim (1985) have suggested procedures and instruments for evaluating enrichment programs for which the community has decided aims and outcomes.

Programs of education for gifted learners, on the other hand, are dynamic, student-teacher interactive, and student-centred. The teacher devises activities that students will find engaging and challenging. Autonomous learner skills and attitudes are taught in high-interest projects or carefully balanced with more appealing tasks to maintain students' enthusiasm. Curriculum extension occurs as a side-effect rather than a central purpose of students' assignments.

Program objectives are simply *optional* ways of contributing to goals such as those listed above under "The Purpose of Programs of Education for Gifted Learners." Emphasis given to research skills, creative thinking techniques, communication ability, making creative products, social/emotional development activities, in-depth independent projects, field trips, group project work, and so on, will depend on many different variables.

#### CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING IDIOSYNCRATIC PROGRAMS OF EDUCATION FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

Objectives-based evaluation criteria (for example, "Did students improve their self-concept?" "Did students increase their ability to find information?")

“Did students increase their ability to work independently?”) are inappropriate for idiosyncratic programs of education for gifted learners. A battery of instruments or procedures may easily overshadow salient or significant events in the program.

An adequate evaluation requires evaluation criteria such as these:

Have students experienced and responded positively to challenges?

Have students developed their interests or talents during program activities?

Has the teacher noticed student growth and development needs, and did program activities provide effectively for them?

Were autonomous learner skills and attitudes of the students increased by program activities?

Given the limitations of end-of-year evaluations, evidence may come from anecdotes and observations from students, parents, teachers, or principals. A grade five student may tell you: “At the beginning of the year I was in agony for a whole week if I had to do a three-page report. Now I just whip off a twelve-page report without thinking that it’s a big deal.” A parent may tell you: “Before the program started my son was a quiet little bookworm. Each student in the program had to interview a prominent community member. This was really frightening for him to do. Now he’s so much more outgoing. He’s more social and has more initiative than I realized.”

#### INTERVIEW SCHEDULES FOR EVALUATION OF PROGRAMS FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

Interviews offer an effective and efficient way of obtaining anecdotes and observations useful in judging goal accomplishment. I here provide interview questions that individuals external to programs of education for gifted learners may use to participate in the study or evaluation of such programs. Combined with classroom observation, examination of students’ work, and consultation with program coordinators, these questions produce evidence suited to the evaluation criteria mentioned earlier.

Four sets of interview questions appear in Schedules 1 through 4 for students, parents, principals, and teachers, respectively. The students’ and parents’ questions are used in group interviews with groups formed according to program pull-out units. The principals’ interviews are conducted individually. Teachers may be interviewed individually or in pairs. (Although it is somewhat more complicated to interview teachers in pairs, their responses are often fuller than in private interviews.)

The students’ interview schedule begins with three “warm-up” questions. It ends with a “cool down” question that takes attention away from the

SCHEDULE 1  
*Interview Questions for Groups of Students*

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1. Can you tell me some of your favourite *hobbies* or interests? What's your favourite *subject*?
  2. Does anyone take *lessons* of any kind outside of school?
  3. How long have you *lived* in this community?
  4. How is what you do in pull-out *different* from regular class activities?
  5. What makes it *special* or important for you?
  6. Would you *miss it* if you didn't go?
  7. Is there anything in particular that you've done or made that you really *enjoyed the most* or that was special for you in some way?
  8. If you could *change* it in some way or add one thing to it, what would it be?
  9. Have you learned something about *yourself* from going to pull-out?
  10. Have you *changed* in any way?
  11. Are there any *disadvantages* to going to pull-out?
  12. What are you going to do this *summer*?
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SCHEDULE 2  
*Interview Questions for Groups of Parents*

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1. From your perspective, what *benefits* does the program have for participating children?
  2. How are the program activities *different* from regular classroom activities?
  3. Are there any other ways in which the program activities are *special* or important for your child?
  4. Are there any particular activities, experiences, or projects which have generated the most *excitement* for your child?
  5. If you could suggest one *change* or addition to the program, what would it be?
  6. Has your child *changed* in any way because of the program experience?
  7. Are there any *disadvantages* with the program?
  8. Have you *learned* something about your child because of the program?
  9. What *questions* do you hope the study might help to answer?
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program before they return to their classrooms. Responses to these extraneous questions also provide the evaluator with background or contextual information about the students and about their composition as a group. At the conclusion of each parents' interview, parents are encouraged to submit letters or to request follow-up telephone calls if they have more ideas they wish to express.

All interviews should be taped and transcribed, and handwritten notes should also be taken during the course of the interviews. Interviewees should be informed about measures taken to ensure anonymity (for example, using an out-of-town transcription typist). Each group or individual is also informed that the study will develop a composite picture of the program. The interview questions prompt people to remember thoughts, observations, and

SCHEDULE 3  
*Interview Questions for Principals*

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1. From your perspective, what benefits does the program have for the participating children?
  2. Are there any important ways in which their program activities are different from regular class activities?
  3. What does the program teacher do with the children in the pull-out that she/he couldn't do with/for them if they were mixed in with other children as part of a whole class?
  4. Are there any positive side-effects of the program?—for the students, their class, or the school?
  5. Are there any negative side-effects?
  6. What is the general staff response to the program?
  7. How do the program activities articulate with the regular class or school program activities?
  8. What kinds of questions do you hope this study might help to answer?
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SCHEDULE 4  
*Interview Questions for Program Teachers*

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1. From your perspective, what benefits does the program have for the participating children?
  2. Are there any important ways in which their program activities are different from regular class activities?
  3. What do you do with the children in the pull-out that you couldn't do with/for them if they were mixed in with other children as part of a whole class?
  4. Are there any positive side-effects of the program?—for the students, their class, or the school?
  5. Are there any negative side-effects?
  6. What is the general staff response to the program?
  7. How do the program activities articulate with the regular class or school program activities?
  8. What kinds of questions do you hope this study might help to answer?
  9. How is the program time spent? What activities/purposes are emphasized?
  10. What kind of additional support would be of value?
  11. What obstacles or frustrations exist?
  12. What have you been most pleased about?
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experiences they had over the year. Hearing other people's responses also helps individuals remember things they considered noteworthy.

The interview questions are intentionally open-ended and often non-directional (e.g., "Have you *changed* in any way?" rather than "Has your communication ability increased because of the program?"). Spontaneous responses show which aspects of the program were significant to those involved.

If similar or related information is spontaneously offered by different

groups or individuals, this gives further support and clarity to those ideas. If different observations are offered by different individuals (e.g., “My child became more outgoing”; “My child learned to be organized and even started to keep a tidy room”; “My child finally found activities where she could just keep going and going with all of her ideas”), then the program may be meeting a variety of different needs. By comparing information from different groups, and observing program activities and products, one gets direction for interpreting events in the program. Guba and Lincoln (1981) outlined general ways in which the naturalistic method facilitates recognition of a program’s uniqueness, provides for full exploration of the context, and acquires reliability and validity. The four evaluation criteria (answering challenges, interest and talent nurturance, support to human growth and development needs, increments of autonomous learner skills and attitudes) can be used as interpretive organizers to categorize and summarize the data from interviews. When children tell you, for example, that a particular activity was difficult to do at first but that it was fun and they became “good at it,” this indicates an engaging challenge. When parents express surprise at their children’s demonstrations of social, leadership, or communication strengths, that may indicate the effectiveness of program activities in supporting students’ growth and development needs. If children tell you that their favourite subjects are math and science and that the whole program is in “Language Arts,” that suggests interests and talents are not being nurtured.

#### A SAMPLE STUDY

In 1984–1985, the Yukon Department of Education began its program of education for gifted and talented learners with intermediate grade pull-out programs in five pilot schools. Each school had responsibility for identification of program students, scheduling of pull-out times, and selection of the program teacher. A program coordinator provided materials, objectives, and suggestions for program activities common to all schools. Each school’s program evolved differently despite common inservice programs, materials, and program activities. The varying size and composition of pull-out groups; teachers’ different interest and knowledge areas; scheduling; program room size and location; and students’ characteristics—all these factors help to explain why each school evolved differently.

A study of the program in the last month of the school year used the methods and criteria outlined above. The following questions guided the writing of the evaluation report:

What were the common achievements of the pull-out programs?

What were the idiosyncratic aspects of the pull-out programs?

What were the program benefits for program students, non-program students, and the school?

What could program teachers learn from each others' programs?

What program aspects appear to require attention?

What future program directions appear desirable?

Interview transcripts were analysed according to interview group or individual from each school (or program pull-out unit). Two categories of comments were identified and listed: (1) comments on program benefits; and (2) comments on ideas for further program development. Inspection of these lists, consideration of classroom observations, examination of students' work, and teachers' descriptions of how program time was spent, led to conclusions about the pilot programs. Program benefits for students were assessed in terms of both goals and real (rather than stated) objectives (stated objectives are usually more numerous than real objectives).

#### SUMMARY

Programs of education for gifted learners must be idiosyncratic rather than predetermined by specific objectives. Program evaluation criteria should therefore focus on program goals rather than program objectives. Naturalistic inquiry method produces sensitive descriptions and judgments of these programs.

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Erziehungsprogramme für begabte Kinder können mit Bericherungsprogrammen verglichen werden. Sie unterscheiden sich in der Durchführung, in Lehrer- und Schülereigenschaften und in der ihnen zugrundeliegenden Konzeptualisierung. In dieser Arbeit wird die Programmbewertung beschrieben, die auf Interviews mit offenem Ende basiert, es werden Interviewpläne vorgelegt und Analyse- und Interpretationsmethoden dargestellt.

Los programas de Educación para niños excepcionales pueden contrastar con programas de enriquecimiento que son unicos en su implementación, por las características de sus profesores y estudiantes, y en sus conceptos esenciales. Este artículo

describe una evaluación de los programas basados en entrevistas abiertas, y ofrece esquemas de análisis y interpretación.

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